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Abstract

The (popularly conceived) Middle Ages and (heroic) fantasy share a number of characteristics, such as settings in pre-technological and pre-bureaucratic worlds where men were not yet alienated from their fellow human beings and where things were more « authentic ». However, next to these « surface parallels », we can identify a deeper underlying reason for the close affinity between the Middle Ages and (heroic) fantasy, which is due to the identification of medieval romance as the medieval literary genre per se, and the participation of (heroic) fantasy in this tradition.

Keywords : fantasy, Middle Ages, romance, Tolkien, literary genre
Mots clés : fantasy, Moyen Âge, *romance*, Tolkien, genres littéraires

« The Middle Ages »

Strugnell has pointed out that « […] Western European history, particularly its medieval phase, is one of the sources of heroic fantasy[1] ». It is so indeed, though why, how and to what degree is not so easy to determine. In the following discussion I will therefore try and explore the different ways in which the Middle Ages and (heroic) fantasy literature interact.

Due to limitations of space, I have decided to develop and test my ideas against some of the « core » works of early modern fantasy written in or shortly after the first half of the twentieth century – works that have proven influential for later writers. These are Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* series (1932- ; sword and sorcery heroic fantasy), Clive Staples Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56 ; Christian heroic fantasy),

1. John Strugnell, « Hammering the Demons : Sword, Sorcery and Contemporary Society », quote p. 175 [full references in Bibliography].

and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (published 1954-55, but written 1937-1949 ; epic fantasy) – all of which may be subsumed under the heading « (heroic) fantasy ».

The starting point for our investigation is the contemporary popular conception of « *the* Middle Ages ». First of all, it is (I would argue) possible to talk about « *the* Middle Ages » in a popular context – something that would be quite out of question within a scholarly context. These « Middle Ages of the Others » (meaning the non-medievalists) are a conglomerate of sometimes contradictory common places, clichés and (very important !) images that need not add up to a unified picture of the period in question, yet which prove enduring and resistant to attempts at corrections from the scholarly community [2]. The « prototypical » popular conception of the Middle Ages is largely one based on elements from the High and Late Middle Ages, i.e. the time-span stretching from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, with the addition of some elements (witches, inquisitorial persecution of heretics) that belong to the Early Modern period rather than to the Middle Ages proper. By now, it should have become clear that we are not dealing with a historical period (in the scholarly meaning of the word), but with a « temporal fantasy », i.e. a place in time that offers something to modern readers – and this « something » seems to be of use for a number of writers of modern (twentieth century) fantasy. I will therefore take a closer look at some of these shared core-elements.

The Knight in Shining (or not-so-shining) Armour

Geoffrey Chaucer, in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, begins the list of his pilgrims with the knight. He does so not only for reasons of precedence – the knight is arguably the highest-ranking pilgrim – but also because he is the most typical and perfect embodiment of the secular Middle Ages. The members of the clergy, by contrast, are part of a continuum that extends from Late Antiquity to the High Middle Ages and beyond. They are therefore not uniquely medieval [3]. The medieval knight, by contrast, is the product of a process that began in the tenth and eleventh centuries and that transformed the uncouth warrior of old into the accomplished fighter, courtier and moral paragon of the High Middle Ages. Chivalry, as a consciously practised ideal and formalised set of precepts

2. See Valentin Groebner, *Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf*, for an informed and knowledgeable study of this phenomenon. See also Richard Utz, « "Mes souvenirs sont peut-être reconstruits" : Medieval Studies, Medievalism, and the Scholarly and Popular Memories of the Right of the Lord's First Night ».

3. It is necessary to make a distinction between « Catholic countries » and those that divested themselves of the influence of the Catholic Church. In predominantly protestant countries, Roman Catholic clergy is usually automatically associated with the pre-reformation era, hence with the Middle Ages.

(coming close to being an « ideology »), is therefore a typically medieval phenomenon, closely linked to the emergence of the medieval knight[4].

One of the characteristics that make the medieval knight especially attractive is his ability to combine the seemingly contradictory elements of savage strength and refined courtliness – or, to use a medieval metaphor, his ability to be a lion on the battlefield and a lamb in the hall. The idea of a « killing machine » able and willing to practise self-restraint and following a moral code has exerted a profound fascination on authors of medieval romance. In real life, few knights would have been able to live up to this lofty ideal (Guilleaume le Maréchal comes to mind) and the paragons of chivalry remained mostly a medieval fantasy. The concept of a « moral warrior » is certainly appealing to modern writers of (heroic) fantasy and we find him in various forms and shapes all over the place.

A protagonist such as Faramir in *The Lord of the Rings* could be seen as an example of how fantasy adapts the figure of the « civilized, moral warrior ». There are, however, less likely figures that also participate in the ideals of chivalry – the most incongruous being, at first sight at least, Conan the Barbarian. Howard's huge warrior from the northern wastes of Cimmeria is, of course, no knight in shining armour. And yet, as Howard is anxious to point out, Conan's moral standards need not shun comparison with any of his more civilised counterparts – on the contrary. Conan possesses an « instinctive » sense for chivalric values : he rescues numerous innocent (and not-so-innocent) maidens in distress, protects the weak, believes in fair dealing, keeps up his honour and is faithful to his word – all things that seem to be less scrupulously observed by the more civilised men he encounters on his travels. Howard has given us, in the spirit of Tacitus' *Germania*, an idealised noble « Northern » savage with a heavy dose of chivalric ethics in the bargain. Conan may be a rather curious example for the influence of chivalry on the development of protagonists of heroic fantasy, yet it shows how this medieval concept had an impact on widely divergent types of heroic warriors.

However, the medieval knight suffers from two drawbacks that render him problematic as a protagonist in his unmitigated form. These are his noble or even aristocratic background and his role within the cult of courtly love. The former is problematic for a readership with an egalitarian and democratic worldview and if the author chooses a chivalric protagonist as focaliser, he must try and render him acceptable to his audience. This is often achieved by having the hero live in exile and present him as bereft of his noble status and property – or simply of an enlightened and democratic frame of mind ; we are, after all, writing fantasy.

The other necessary constituent element of a courtly existence, namely courtly love, is less prominent in (heroic) fantasy – and poses

4. See C. Stephen Jaeger's study *The Origins of Courtliness*.

less of a problem since its modern-day descendant and counterpart, namely « romantic or passionate love », is almost universally accepted. Nevertheless, most writers of heroic fantasy tend to neglect the courtly love element.

The Knight as a Non-Alienated Warrior

The knight may also serve as an example of our next category : that of non-alienated man. Marxist analysis and critique of industrial society has rightly highlighted the increasing alienation of man from his environment and his fellow human beings. Although the modern critique of the excesses of industrialisation presents itself in the guise of a « science of history », it still partakes in the much older mythical topos of the « steady decline » from an originally paradisiacal state [5]. Medieval man, in comparison to his modern descendant, was not yet as alienated, neither in his personal nor professional nor political relationships. The knight as a warrior still relies on his physical strength and martial skills and confronts his enemy face to face (or visor to visor) – quite unlike the modern soldier who is trained to kill, if possible, from a safe distance. The protagonists of (heroic) fantasy, like the medieval knight, are still in immediate and direct control of their « means », be they weapons or magic, and the chain of « cause and effect » is obvious and visible to all. As a consequence, these protagonists are seen as presenting a type of person whose actions have an (almost immediate) effect on their environment and society [6] – in contrast to modern man whose actions seem to fall flat most of the time.

Furthermore, medieval man is close, or at least closer, to nature. He is, unlike modern man, not screened and protected from the effects of the climate, wildlife or the weather by the achievements of civilisation and technology. This « direct contact » makes medieval life, from a modern point of view, « authentic ». Heroic fantasy exploits this desire for « the authentic », for life in the raw – while simultaneously ignoring or omitting the most unsavoury aspects and thus providing a certain degree of idealisation [7].

In case of the protagonists' characters this idealisation often goes hand in hand with a « typification » and simplification – which comes as no surprise since it is the complex characters that have the tendency to feel alienated [8] whereas « simple » ones find it easier to fit into a suitable

5. See Charles A. Huttar, « Tolkien, Epic Traditions, and Golden Age Myths ».
6. See also Florian F. Marzin, « Fantasy als literarische Gattung », esp. p. 99 on simplified problem-solving strategies as a characteristic of fantasy.
7. See also Franz Rottensteiner, « Zweifel und Gewissheit. Zu Traditionen, Definitionen und einigen notwendigen Abgrenzungen in der phantastischen Literatur », esp. p. 16.
8. Hamlet is arguably one of the first « alienated complex modern men » in English literature.

category. The protagonists of (heroic) fantasy are therefore often not very complex characters. Conan, for example, is a supreme instance of barbaric simplicity. Yet even more respectable protagonists, such as Aragorn, are depicted as basically straightforward heroic characters in the medieval vein [9]. Peter Jackson obviously found Tolkien's Aragorn too alien to the tastes of a twenty-first century audience, and thus transformed the medieval heroic warrior into a self-doubting, emotionally torn, initially alienated and basically « modern » man with whom we can identify more easily [10].

The Knight as Representative of Hierarchical Order

One popular view of the Middle Ages perceives them as a time of a clearly and hierarchically ordered society, which must be seen in direct and causal relation to the medieval theory of the three estates – that in turn informs the very structure of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* itself. Chaucer starts out with the highest-ranking member of the *bellatores*, i.e. the nobility. This « estate » is then followed by the *oratores*, i.e. the clergy. The third and lowest estate of the *laboratores*, i.e. peasants, agricultural workers and craftsmen, comprises the last group of pilgrims [11]. The concept of the tripartite structured society can be traced back at least to the tenth century (Aelfric) [12] and its roots may even reach further into the beginnings of Indo-European society [13]. It may be therefore no coincidence that the Fellowship of the Ring, the model for many of the later bands of adventurers populating the works of heroic and epic fantasy, contains representatives of these three estates with *bellatores* (Aragorn, Boromir, Legolas, Gimli), *oratores* (Gandalf), and *laboratores* (Sam). Such an « archetypal model » suggests not only « social security » (each person knows his or her clearly assigned place within society), but it also consists of personalised relationships between members of the society. Modern society and especially the modern state is often perceived and experienced as an abstract, impersonal and bewilderingly complex construction. We no longer stand in more or less close personal contact with our « superiors and inferiors » and the mutual obligations and rights of the members of modern society are defined by abstract laws and regulations. Not so in the Middle Ages. Whether we take feudalism or some related forms of hierarchically

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9. See Helmut W. Pesch, *Fantasy. Theorie und Geschichte*, p. 41, who points out the important narrative function of « the man with the weapon in his hand » in fantasy literature.
10. See Connie Veugen, « "A Man, lean, dark, tall" : Aragorn Seen Through Different Media », for a discussion of the character of Aragorn.
11. Although the division into the three estates provides the basic structure, it is varied and broken up by the inclusion of pilgrims who no longer fit the pattern. Chaucer thus reflects, to some extent, medieval reality.
12. According to Aelfric, Christian society was comprised of those who pray (the clergy), those who fight (the nobility), and those who work (the labourers).
13. Cf. Dumézil's « idéologie tripartite » : warrior – priest – farmer.

structured rulership, it is the personal relations between the people placed in these structures that are of vital importance. In feudalism, each man finds himself at the centre of numerous bonds of obligations and he stands in personal contact with those above and below himself – hierarchy, law, government etc. have very concrete faces ! As Alice Chandler puts it in her study of nineteenth century medievalism : « Feudalism was seen as fatherhood, and the [Middle Ages] […] became a metaphor both for a specific social order and, somewhat more vaguely, for a metaphysically harmonious world view [14]. » It is clear that these characteristics associated with (or rather : projected onto) the medieval world where personal actions are able to change society in a very tangible way also prove attractive to a modern readership of fantasy. Thus, the protagonists of heroic fantasy do not fight for abstract principles nor is their loyalty given to abstract laws. Theirs, too, is a universe where friend and foe are intensely personal and have to be confronted directly.

The Knight as the Author of Romance

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the knight, as the highest-ranking pilgrim, heads off the story-telling competition with a chivalric romance. His tale is not only in keeping with his estate, but it also tells us something about how he himself sees chivalry – as does the contribution of his son and squire later on. Yet while the tales of the two representatives of the first estate are « chivalric romances », it is the (dramatically interrupted and thus unfinished) « Tale of Sir Thopas » by Chaucer the Pilgrim that provides the most accurate idea of what a typical (popular) medieval romance looked like : a knight sets out, decides to go on a quest for the queen of fairy, encounters a giant… Although the « Tale of Sir Thopas » is a parody and exaggerates the stock-elements of medieval romance, they stand out all the more clearly – and much of it is strongly reminiscent of (heroic) fantasy for the modern reader. Or rather the other way round : modern twentieth century fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, participates in the same textual and literary strategies that are constitutive for (medieval) romance.

Romance, as I use the term here, is not so much a clearly defined « genre » but rather a « literary and textual strategy [15] ». This « literary and textual strategy » and its elements are not limited to texts classified as « romances proper », but they may also occur elsewhere. Such a shift away from the « classical » concept of genre would, of course, necessitate a re-evaluation of most works according to the new parameters. The *Odyssee*, for

14. Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order*, quote p. 1. See also Franz Rottensteiner, « Zweifel und Gewissheit. Zu Traditionen, Definitionen und einigen notwendigen Abgrenzungen in der phantastischen Literatur », p. 16, who explicitly mentions this parallel between the depiction of social structures in fantasy and the (idealised) Middle Ages.

15. Barbara Fuchs, *Romance*, p. 9.

example, with its numerous « romance elements » (cf. below), would most likely be re-classified as belonging to the « romance tradition ». The entire problem of « genre » is, however, of little relevance in our case. This is so because those texts that are generally subsumed under the label « medieval romance [16] » are seen as the most prominent and typical representatives of their kind – they are the « prototypical » romances per se. Indeed, the application of the « genre term » *romance* to these medieval texts seems one of the rare instances that have gained general approval – in the English-speaking world, at least. Thus, « medieval romance » texts can be used in both the « genre » and the « literary and textual strategy » discourses – it is in medieval romances that the two overlap, however disparate they may be in other cases.

Romance and Fantasy

Modern fantasy, then, shares the core-characteristics of romance [17], which are, according to Fuchs [18], wandering, obscured identity, idealization, the marvellous, and narrative delay. The « wandering » of the main protagonists is often connected with a « quest » – Auerbach has identified the pivotal moment of (medieval) romance as « the knight sets forth », and the Quest for the Grail is a prime example of such a vaguely directed search, which seems to consist mostly of digressions. The same may be said of the « anti-quest » in *The Lord of the Rings* or of the sequence of adventures in other works of fantasy. It is the journey and the meetings along the way that constitute the narrative.

The second characteristic of romance, « obscured identity », whether consciously chosen – the knight who partakes incognito in the tournament ; the hero-protagonist who adopts an alias to throw off his pursuers – or the result of fate – the new-born baby abandoned in the woods ; the heir to the throne in exile – is a standard topos both of romance and fantasy.

Idealization, as the third element, is often found in connection with the moral stance of protagonists, who are rather clearly assigned to one side or other, and even such a long and complex work as *The Lord of the Rings* makes use of idealization to a degree that would be not acceptable within the framework of a « realistic » novel.

Last but one, the marvellous – often seen as a touchstone characteristic of fantasy and medieval romance – can be subsumed under the supernatural, a category of which the novel is deeply suspicious. Demons, gods, miracles,

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16. See W.R.J. Barron, *English Medieval Romance* ; Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (eds.), *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* ; and John Stevens, *Medieval Romance : Themes and Approaches*.

17. Fantasy has, of course, also adopted some features unknown to medieval romance, such as a certain realism in character- and landscape-descriptions.

18. Barbara Fuchs, *op. cit*., p. 9.

visions, magic and sorcery – they have their place both in romance and fantasy. Yet I would argue that their importance stands in no direct relationship to their prominence, which derives from the fact that these elements are the most obvious violations of the « generic expectations » associated with the (realistic) novel.

Finally, and more important than the preceding elements, is the narrative delay. Neither romance nor (heroic) fantasy has a teleological drive – such as found in the classical epic [19]. The narrative is dominated by a digressive sequence of events, by « aventiure », i.e. « that which occurs/comes towards you » and to which the protagonists react. The narrative scope of romance and fantasy is thus potentially open-ended – witness the score of volumes of the Conan series, the sequence of the Narnia books, or the way commercially successful modern fantasy spawns one sequel after another [20]. Within the tale itself, the delay is often created by the intricate and sophisticated use of the interlace pattern. Chrétiens de Troyes romances, such as *Le Conte du Graal* or *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, provide prime examples of this technique – which is also found in the later books of *The Lord of the Rings*.

My argument in the preceding paragraphs has been for identifying the shared literary strategies that make (heroic) fantasy partake in the « literary strategy of romance ». Yet such an overlap with romance need not necessarily link it to the Middle Ages – we find romance before and after (e.g. Heliodorus' *Ethiopica* or Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, or Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, respectively). However, romance as a genre has become strongly, almost exclusively, associated with the Middle Ages and literary critics often consider « romance » *the* medieval secular literary genre par excellence [21], implicitly contrasting it with the novel as the literary genre typical for the Age of Enlightenment or the epic as that of classical antiquity. Medieval romance has therefore become the most typical manifestation of the « spirit of romance ». As a consequence, the popular conception of romance as *the* medieval genre is, in my mind, the main reason for the close association and identification of (heroic) fantasy with the Middle Ages.

Conclusion : From Bedfellows to Relatives

In conclusion, we can characterise the relationship between (heroic) fantasy and the Middle Ages as follows. First, we have seen that the « popular » view of the Middle Ages, although in itself not free from

19. This does not preclude the occurrence of « romance strategies and elements » within the classical epic, such as the *Aeneid*.

20. See Anne Besson, *D'Asimov à Tolkien*.

21. Barbara Fuchs, *op. cit.*, p. 38, points out that we often encounter a « problematic metonymic association of romance with the Middle Ages ».

contradictions, presents them as an age lacking the negative effects brought about by technology, industrialisation and the rise of the modern state ; an age that yet benefits from the presence of Christian and chivalric morals. In short, the Middle Ages are pre-industrial, pre-technological and thus « authentic » without sinking to the level of total savagery. The basic underlying assumption is that we are separated from the Middle Ages only by a veneer of technology and bureaucracy. Strip it away and we find ourselves transported six or seven hundred years into the past. This anthropological constancy over the centuries is also exploited in works of literary fantasy and, as a consequence, the human protagonists become accessible to a modern audience and are not as alien as people from other eras [22] while remaining, at the same time, sufficiently different and « exotic ».

Second, the popular conception of the Middle Ages provides a more or less ready made and almost universally recognisable framework for a secondary world. The author need not depict all the details of such a world but can set highlights and focus on those aspects that are of immediate interest to him [23]. Everything else will be « filled in » by the readers who merely have to be clued to the general « medieval » nature of the secondary world.

Third, the self-presentation of the Middle Ages as an ordered and coherent civilisation contrasts with the disjuncture, isolation and incoherence experienced in modern society. Fantasy partakes in this « medieval dream of order » and presents its readers the vision of a harmonious and hierarchical society.

Last, and probably most important, is the use of strategies of romance in works of fantasy. (Heroic) fantasy thus inscribes itself into a tradition whose most typical representative can be found in medieval romance and not only imports the (theoretically universally applicable) literary strategies of romance, but also elements, motifs, topoi etc. in their medieval guise. It is these « surface » elements that have first attracted the critical attention of scholars investigating the relationship between fantasy and the Middle Ages. Yet, as we have seen, the relationship goes deeper and beyond and rests on the foundation of a shared literary strategy which may be called « romance ».

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22. See Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy*, p. 76 : « The inhabitants and affairs of secondary world will awaken an interest in the reader only if he can feel some underlying comprehension of and sympathy for them. »

23. This does, of course, not exclude the possibility of extended « secondary world construction », as is the case in Tolkien's work.

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